

Right to Counsel NYC Coalition & Council Members Introduce New Bill to Empower Tenant Organizing

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City Hall – Today, **NYC Council Members Mark Levine** and **Vanessa L. Gibson** were joined by the **Right to Counsel NYC Coalition** for a press conference announcing new legislation that would require the City of New York to work with trusted tenant organizing groups to engage and educate tenants about their rights. The bill would strengthen the City’s landmark Right to Counsel (RTC) by ensuring that all tenants know about the new RTC law, understand it, and use it as a tool to address housing issues.

The majority of tenants who are eligible for legal representation under the Right to Counsel law don't know about it. A recent survey done by volunteers with Bronx Court Watch at the Bronx Housing Court found that 53% of tenants who had a right to a lawyer didn't know about this right before arriving in court. There are 345,000 renter households in RTC zip codes who have a right to know about the new law.

Tenant organizing groups are the most effective means of ensuring tenants know about their rights. In the past year, the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition was able to fund the work of four community organizers, one organizer at each of the following organizations: Flatbush Tenant Coalition in Brooklyn, Goddard Riverside Community Center in Manhattan, Catholic Migration Services in Queens, and the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition in The Bronx. Collectively, over the last 10 months, these organizers:

- Distributed information about RTC to nearly 12,000 people.
- Conducted outreach to approximately 211 buildings.
- Conducted 63 know-your-rights workshops reaching more than 1,300 tenants.
- Formed 17 new tenants associations, in which over 400 tenants are active.
- Stopped harassment in more than 500 households.
- Helped almost 500 households get repairs.

Council Member Levine and **Gibson’s** new bill calls on the city to fund the work being done by tenant organizing groups across the city to further expand the Right to Counsel law’s success. The Members also reiterated their call to pass the [Right to Counsel 2.0](#) legislation they [introduced last year](#).

“The latest eviction numbers confirm what we already know — when tenants are given a fair chance to fight in housing court, they will win,” said **Council Member Levine**, who Introduced the City’s Right to Counsel Law. “In the past five years we have seen an unprecedented 37% decline in the number of people forced to leave their homes, but we can’t afford to take our foot off the gas. We need to expand and strengthen this law to keep New Yorkers in their homes, off the streets, and out of the shelter system. And most importantly, we need to empower the groups responsible for reaching out to tenants, and making sure they know they don’t have to face eviction on their own.”

“It is vital to inform and connect residents with the historic and life changing services of the Right to Counsel Law. Already, thousands of residents are receiving the free legal representation they need to stay in their homes, but so many more have yet to be reached. Tenants organizing groups play a key role in their neighborhoods and are the City’s direct, on-the-ground link to the needs of our constituencies. In order to ensure that all eligible tenants understand the Right to Counsel Law and use it as a tool to address housing

issues, we must work with tenant organizing groups every step of the way. I am proud to work with my Colleague Mark Levine in introducing this legislation as we continue to strengthen the many facets of tenant rights and protections,” said **Council Member Vanessa L. Gibson**.

“When a landlord wants you out, there’s nothing they won’t do to you. Ignore your repair requests, lose your rent checks, frankly, make life hell for you and your family. That’s a fact. And if you stand up to them, stand up for your rights, then all bets are off. They will drag you to court for no reason. With the Right to Counsel, I know that when my landlord tries to take me to court, I have a lawyer and a team of tenant organizers who have my back. That’s why Right to Counsel and Goddard Riverside Law Project are special to me,” said **Patricia Bowles-Simmonds, a tenant leader at the Goddard Riverside Community Center**.

“Right to Counsel is working, but we must continue to strengthen it,” said **AARP New York State Director Beth Finkel**. “Unfortunately, too many New Yorkers still don’t know they have a right to a lawyer in housing court. Finding and funding neighborhood-based organizations that have the trust of tenants is the best way to reach the most vulnerable New Yorkers about this important program.”

“RTC allows us to organize stronger and without fear because it lessens landlords’ abilities to intimidate. It gives us hope and a reason to continue to fight because it puts power in the hands of tenants, not landlords,” said **Nadia Metayer, a tenant leader at Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA) in the Bronx**.

“RTC and rent strikes are vital tools tenants with limited resources need and are often not aware of. Threats and scare tactics are often used by landlords, causing tenants to be forced out of their homes due to inability to meet unfair financial demands or to live in unsafe and uninhabitable conditions. Institutions such as The North West Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition are instrumental in teaching tenants about their rights and tools at their disposal, such as rent strikes, to take on landlords who seem out of reach,” said **Yarisme Guilamo, tenant leader at the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition in the Bronx**.

“Tenant displacement is one of the leading causes of homelessness across NYC, and we need relief now! We cannot afford to wait! We are being priced and put out. We have come together as parents, grandparents, voters, and taxpayers to call on our elected officials to help us. The health of our city depends on addressing this housing crisis adequately and in a timely matter. It is important to organize. If we don’t organize, we are going to be homeless. If we don’t organize, we will have to prepare for more hardship. We should not fear to organize. If anything, we should fear homelessness. Let’s come together as one to save our community. Fight to stay in your home!,” said **Tami, tenant leader at the Flatbush Tenant Coalition**.

“Thirteen years ago, in 2006, my rent-regulated building was bought by a predatory equity landlord, who promised high rates of returns to their investors. Those returns could only be achieved by pushing out my neighbors and fellow tenants—many of whom were seniors, immigrants and non-English speaking. Even though the landlord managed to clear out the buildings of many long-time residents, CMS helped us form a tenants’ union across the 80 buildings in the landlord’s portfolio, and through litigation and organizing efforts, we got relief and put a stop to these predatory practices. I’ve seen firsthand the power of organizing and how effective it can be. For that reason, I support this bill and call on the elected officials to pass it.” said **Lauren Springer, tenant leader at Catholic Migration Services in Queens**.

The Right to Counsel NYC Coalition is a coalition of tenants, community organizers, legal service providers, academics, and more. In 2017, the coalition won a 3-year campaign to make it a right for low-income tenants to have an attorney when facing an eviction in housing court. NYC became the first city in the nation to win this right. The coalition continues to organize for a just implementation and expansion of the law.